

How do you Rate?

Success and growing pains for superyacht racing

By **Kenny Wooton**

Ratings, or complaining about them, are central to all yacht racing, at all sizes. Here Kenny Wooton looks at the now ubiquitous bucket rating system and we also show in a sidebar Jim Clark's impassioned objection to the use of rockstar sailors in what is essentially an amateur Corinthian sport. In a second open letter he suggests an innovative and unusual approach to creating a spectator sport of kings and one that benefits the world's oceans and superyachting's image.

Race Day One, last year at the Newport Bucket: The 47.5mt motorsailer *MITSeaAH* is having trouble reaching the first weather mark in a timely fashion. The rest of the fleet forges ahead. The race committee calls the yacht's "safety tactician" and suggests they forget the mark, turn around and join the fleet en route to the finish.

The next day, *MITSeaAH* is ordered to leave her sails and telescoping mainmast down, cross the start line under full power, execute a 360-degree turn, then proceed at full throttle to the weather mark. Once around, she raises her mast, sets her sails and reaches around the rest of the course with the fleet. She finds herself in the thick of the action, her crew and guests are happy and the yacht's best attributes are demonstrated.

Welcome to "ship racing" Bucket regatta-style – no protests, no collisions, no lawsuits and, equally important, everyone makes the party and has a grand old time.

The *MITSeaAH* correction last year is emblematic of the way the Buckets were once managed and, in some ways, comprise the core values the organisers would like to maintain moving forward. But with the success the regattas have experienced, changes are in the wind. Superyacht racing in general is undergoing some growing pains and organisers are taking steps to address them.

"These events are geared toward people who like comfortable cruising yachts, but who like to get into a racing venue and strut their stuff," says Hank Halsted, principal of Northrop and Johnson Newport and managing director of the Newport and St Barths buckets.



The proliferation of supersailers over the past decade and increasing interest on the part of their owners to race them has fuelled the growth of events such as the Superyacht Cups in Palma and Antigua and the Bucket regattas, and several smaller, similar events. These regattas have had up years and down years, but overall, the fleets are strong. But with greater numbers on the courses and increasingly competitive owners and crew, race management has become more complicated. Issues have surfaced as organisers have struggled to keep the racing fair and safe.

Handicapping yachts of widely divergent design and performance characteristics is nothing new. An alphabet soup of rating systems and rules has emerged over the years – and in some cases, faded away – that were meant to level the playing field among disparate designs. For time eternal, owners have debated and disputed the ratings that affect their corrected finish time in races.

As has been the case with numerous regattas over the decades, the origin of the Bucket regattas was a rum-fuelled bar bet on Nantucket in 1986. Tradition has it that seven large cruising yachts took a line the next day on Nantucket Sound and hashed it out over a 15-mile course. The prize

would be a Chardonnay bucket from the restaurant in which the challenge was issued. No one recalls who won, but the Nantucket Bucket was born.

In its early years, the annual event was a casual affair. “Win the party” was a long-time tagline. Later, several of the principals instituted a similar regatta in St Barths, and an unaffiliated superyacht racing event was begun in Palma. As the years wore on, the original Nantucket organisers lost interest and the event was re-staged in Newport and has flourished there.

“Win the party” was a long-time tagline

Earlier in the current decade, Halsted and the organisers of the Bucket regattas determined that existing rating and handicapping systems were inadequate to level the field for fleets that now range from super-maxis and relatively nimble J-Class reproductions, to yachts that take five minutes or more to tack and longer to stop than a freight train. Naval architect and handicapping expert Jim Teeters attended the St Barths in 2003 and after some discussions with the organisers and others, Teeters proposed a solution.

Teeters’ solution, which eventually became known as the Bucket Rule, was based on an existing Velocity Prediction Program (VPP) and tailored to each yacht’s specifications. At first, the system operated with simple parameters – LOA, LWL, displacement, keel type, etc. supplied by captains and owners. A polar table was developed for each boat. Predicted speed was degraded based on factors such as the age and shape of sails and whether a yacht had to furl its headsail to tack.

“The idea was to build up a polar table using a VPP as the initial ‘guess’, then modify that based on the declarations of compromises in design,” says Teeters. “Then we’d modify it further based on what we saw on the water. After a few races, the polar table would be pretty much set.”

That system, tweaked for improvement, remains in place today. The information is fed into the VPP, which predicts performance for each yacht on the various legs of the day’s course, taking into account the forecast wind speed and the wind angles the fleet will encounter. A predicted elapsed time around the course is generated for each yacht, which dictates the times each will start. The ‘pursuit’ start is meant to even out the various yachts’ advantages and disadvantages and result in a grouped finish that can be scored simply in the order the yachts cross the line.

As with all yacht race handicapping systems, owners and captains quibble over the details, but with the exception of minor tweaks, the organisers will only change a rating if they determine there are ‘gross anomalies’ based on real-world observations. With the success of the rule, says Teeters, designers have been more forthcoming with detailed information about the their yachts, which makes for even more accurate ratings.



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“The Bucket Rule since its inception has produced astoundingly close and fair results and rewarded good sailing over good boats,” Halsted says, in defence of the rule. “In terms of who wins the regatta, we have no interest in that. For us, a winning regatta is one where everyone leaves excited after having completed a great series of close races... If there is a weakness in the Bucket Rule – and this is the case with all pursuit racing – it’s that your handicap is induced at the start,” he says. “Therefore, we are dependent on accurate weather forecasting to produce the most reliable start times and results.”

With each event, the rating and forecasting process gets more sophisticated, but the success of the events (St Barths this year had 39 entries) has pushed more to the fore another critical factor that transcends all else: safety.

If there is one thing much of the world’s fleet of divergent supersailers has in common it is that, unlike their racy cousins, they don’t turn or stop well. They manoeuvre more like supertankers than typical racing yachts. Simple tacking can be a vastly complicated manoeuvre that can take minutes to accomplish. The spectre of close-quarter mark roundings and all the havoc that could generate has resulted in the creation of a unique set of rules that diverge in many ways from the traditional yacht racing and right of way rules. *“Manoeuvring these boats in close quarters takes a lot of focus, a lot of lead time and a lot of understanding,” Halsted says. “Fundamentally, we are racing ships.”*

Based on COLREGS rather than the traditional yacht

racing rules, the Superyacht Protocol is intended to prevent damage to the fleet of very expensive yachts, injury to crew or worse – contingencies that would not win the party, but end it for good. Among the elements of the evolving Superyacht Protocol is a rule that yachts cannot tack or jibe within a quarter mile of a mark and they must maintain 40 metres circular separation, both of which were enforced earlier this year. Close racing is welcome; close calls are not.

While the Superyacht Protocol is evolving rapidly, counter pressure is coming from another quarter. Feeding the growing pains of the superyacht racing phenomenon is the steady infusion of professionals into the ranks of captains and crew. As a breed, pros tend to be more contentious about ratings (especially if they’re not winning) and more aggressive on the racecourse. Halsted says pros are the foundation of safe superyacht racing because of the skills they bring to the table, but they need to adjust to the performance limitations of the boats and the spirit and rules of the Protocol. And while they may embrace the spirit of fun, the regattas have tried to propagate that the owners bring their own innate competitiveness to the party.

“The biggest conundrum we face – along with safety, which really is the biggest – is how we encourage, while mitigating the competitive instincts of owners and pros. Testosterone is a tough thing to moderate on a competitive race course,” says Halsted.

The Informa Group’s Superyacht Cup regattas in Palma and Antigua recently adopted the Bucket Rule and the



they used the IRC rule to handicap the fleet with mixed success. So far, they're happy with their decision to switch.

"Every rule has its flaws," says Patrick Whetter, director and founder of Superyacht Cup Palma. *"It's certainly the most effective rule for racing dissimilar types of big boats."*

The maturing of the events and the growing ranks of professionals in the fleets have spawned another significant move. The Bucket regattas and the Superyacht Cup events have hired Peter Craig of Premier Racing as Principal Race Officer. Craig has vast experience managing grand prix racing events, but he admits the Bucket-type fleets present unique challenges. He acknowledges the nature of the events has evolved since the early days when owners just came primarily to have a good time.

"There is still a percentage that go to have a great time," Craig says, but there is a subtle shift under way involving the competitive nature of a growing number of the players. *"What they want is a level playing field and the ability to be on the podium at the end of the week if they sail their boats very well."* Bridging that gap in expectations while keeping everyone safe is the challenge of the day.

"You can't keep a hundred percent of the people happy because everyone has different goals," he says. *"But if you can keep the majority thinking you're doing the right thing, you'll continue to grow."*

Growth may not be the ultimate goal of the events. There is a feeling among the St Barths organisers that their fleet

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may be nearing the limit of their ability to manage the event. Twenty-three yachts competed at the Palma event this year in late June (see Research Editor Ellie Brade's article on the event). Whetter feels one way to keep the event safe and also to preserve its social appeal may be to limit the fleet to a number not much greater than that.

Growing pains notwithstanding, the sport of superyacht racing appears to be healthy and here to stay. Even though winning and serious competition have become more important, the core values must be preserved for the events to thrive, says Halsted. He sees the "rollicking fun" that once defined the event at risk with the competitive forces heating up.

Teeters agrees: *"We need to keep the dialogue going between the owners, captains and designers so at the end of the day we're providing a venue for these guys to have fun."*

Images by Esther Barney, Billy Black and Ellie Brade

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Jim Clark's letters follow overleaf

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Legendary Silicon Valley entrepreneur Jim Clark shocked the yacht-racing world in April when he withdrew his new J-Class yacht Hanuman from the Antigua Classic Yacht Regatta at the last minute. The reason? He objected primarily to the fact that rival Ranger, also a J-Class near-replica, was being sailed primarily by professional racers and that her owner would not be steering. He submitted a pair of letters to his fellow J-Class owners; one dealing directly with his withdrawal and the other proposing a new challenge for J-Class owners with a charity component.

The first:

Gentlemen

I have come to the conclusion that racing in the so-called J-Class Association is a complete farce. I learned from talking to the captain of Athena today that both Velsheda and Ranger (opposite bottom) have a complete, paid professional racing crew.

If I wanted to hire a paid professional crew, I would build a real, modern racing boat, or I would make a challenge for the America's Cup. But that type of competition is not of interest to me.

I built a replica of a J-Class boat because I thought it was very beautiful. Originally, I did not want to even race it, but last summer, Mr Williams wanted to prove something so he challenged us to a race. I reluctantly did the race. It was pretty evenly matched, even though John Williams did not drive (in the proper spirit of the rules), and hired a professional skipper.

What is going on now has nothing whatsoever to do with the J-Class Association rules. The rules stipulate

that either the owner or the captain, or a non-professional skipper, must drive the boat. Obviously, the owner of Velsheda, being a true sailor, can drive his own boat, and has done so for quite some time. Because of the nature of his rivalry with John Williams, however, even he has gotten reduced into hiring a crew.

I am not going to do that. I did not build Hanuman to let someone else drive it. But I also know that professionals are called that for a reason. I am not going to hire professionals to win a trophy.

I have a group of fine men who came to sail for the pleasure of it, and got little more than the trip to Antigua and room and board. I will let them have that for free, or they can choose to go home, but I am not going to race Hanuman (below and opposite top) under these conditions.

To make things clear, however, if at any time, the owner of either Velsheda or Ranger agrees to drive their own boats for the pleasure of racing each other, and have no paid professional except the full-time crew members, I will happily do so

in the spirit of gentlemen's racing, and, I emphasise, in the spirit of the J-Class Association Rules. In the meantime, I wish them well and hope they don't crash into each other.

And later:

There seems to be quite a stir amongst the owners and the yachting press regarding my cancellation of Hanuman/Endeavour II participation in the races in Antigua. Let me explain my reasoning more fully and make a proposal for a J-Class event.

From the beginning, it has been my impression that for rule-conformance and safety, there were four to six professionals on each J-Class boat that is raced. This is the spirit of the J-Class rules that I was told, and everyone involved in the building of Endeavour II/Hanuman will attest to this. As I slowly got drawn towards this Antigua event, I put together a team in this spirit, but I was adamant that I would not spend a lot of money just to win a race. Then I heard for the first time that Ranger had 17 paid professionals, and I chose not to compete against a professional team.





The world of sail-boat racing can be quite fun, but spending obscene amounts of money to win a race, in the opinion of most reasonable people, is not a very worthy thing to do. It contributes to an elitist image of sailing, which I have never wanted to be a part of. As a result, I have never gotten involved in professional racing. No one begrudges the professionals who make their living doing this, but those of us who spend lavishly to win a race should at least contribute to the world in other ways.

Like all of you, I consider the J-Class boats the most spectacular and beautiful America's Cup boats ever made, and it would certainly be a major event to see them all racing together in a highly visible venue. But we have the opportunity to improve this sport for such an event by setting an example, rather than continuing to contribute to its elitist image, such as in the current America's Cup, where the spending has gotten completely out of control.

So I make the following proposal to the owners of the J-Boats: for an event commensurate with the America's Cup in San Francisco, we all race with completely professional crews, and for safety reasons, the owners who choose to drive have a professional standing near the helm to take over when appropriate. If this venue cannot be arranged, or we think it's too far in the future, we agree on another venue such as the Olympics in England in 2012. But for maximum impact, it should be in a highly visible venue, and it should be a regular event, say every two or three years.

So perhaps we do one event in 2012 and another in 2014 at the America's Cup venue.

As an entry fee, we each post \$10 million of our own money to a non-profit of our choice devoted to preserving the world's marine environment. This must be a legitimate, registered non-profit, and we cannot have any controlling, board member or similar affiliation with it.

We track what we spend, and it is audited and certified by professional auditors. Anyone can choose to spend what they want, but if any owner spends more than \$5 million in preparation and competing for the event, that owner adds to his fund an amount equal to \$2 for each dollar spent above the \$5 million.

We can each have sponsors, but the sponsors' contributions must go to the respective non-profit fund as well. I believe that if we can have this event in San Francisco with the America's Cup, we will draw very large corporate sponsorship and thus greatly increase the contribution to the non-profits' funds, as this is a natural and highly visible sailing amphitheatre. We race according to traditional yacht-racing rules, with adjustments as agreed upon by us, and we have an agreed-upon handicapping system. Perhaps the J-Class Association rules would be appropriate for this, since they have been designed to make the boats as equally competitive as possible.

The main purpose of rules is safety. Ranger and Velsheda have collided twice in their years of racing. To ensure against the possibility of this, prior to the

race, each of us posts an amount we all agree upon to separate escrow accounts, the proceeds of which will be paid if needed by the offending owner to the damaged owner, as judged by a racing committee established or sanctioned by us in advance.

We can negotiate the amounts I've proposed and the other conditions, but for maximum impact on our sport, and the awareness of the world, the money must be a non-trivial amount. Each of the owners has spent at least \$10 million for sails, crew, and boat improvements for the purpose of racing in the past. Now, we should set an example and show the world that at least some 'yacht' owners are concerned about more than themselves. It's the only way I will engage in this type of competition. I will volunteer to donate what is necessary to create a trophy, up to \$500,000. The trophy will be held in a manner similar to the America's Cup. I suggest The Ocean's Cup, because I feel it should be about the marine environment.

I believe this could have a tremendous impact on our sport and show the world that 'yacht' owners are not just ostentatious exhibitionists racing out of ego to win a trophy. And if enough money can be raised with sponsors, we can have a real impact on the world's oceanic environment.

Gentlemen, we diminish our own standing and the image of the sport of sailing when we brag about our boats or their sizes. Let's be bigger than that. We are each fortunate to have the money to spend on owning these boats, and if we all do this in the spirit of friendship, dedication to the sport of sailing, and devotion to the oceans that they use, perhaps we can have an impact that makes our own indulgences worthwhile.

**Hanuman images by Cory Silken
Ranger image by Tork Buckley**

